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Author(s): J. D. O'HARA

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*Mute Choirboys and Angelic Pigs: The Fable
in LORD OF THE FLIES*

Lord of the Flies HAS BEEN AROUND NOW FOR TWELVE YEARS—TIME enough, one would think, for its significances to be common knowledge. Critical articles on the novel are disappointing, however; in their haste to get to Golding's later works or to his sources, most critics skimp on their analysis of the novel itself. I propose, therefore, to clarify the fable's meaning and then to examine its validity. Along the way I will offer answers to some of the most obvious unanswered questions generated by the fable: What does Simon know about the Beast that the other boys do not? Why do the children divide the work so awkwardly that hunting and firetending fall to one group? Why is the story's unbrutish intellectual named Piggy? Why is Beelzebub's symbol a pig's head?

Most readers of *Lord of the Flies* will agree that it is a fable about the impossibility of a utopian society, a social fable that deals largely in psychological rather than political, economic, or social ideas. They will also agree that through the fable Golding expands Hobbes to read, "Life in nature or in society is nasty, brutish, and short."

Golding begins by assembling what seem to be the ideal ingredients of Utopia. The island is isolated, fertile, healthy, and comfortable. The humans are young, homogeneous, and remarkably innocent; not a Teddy boy in the lot. Sex is no problem ("Two Paradises 'twere in one/ To live in Paradise alone"). But Golding sees no hope for any Earthly Paradise. *Et in Arcadia ego*—and id and libido, Golding adds, but precious little superego. The fierce demands of the mind and the contradictions of human society make peace on the island impossible.

Society's contradictions are acted out in Golding's fable when the children divide themselves up to carry on the daily routine of life. To one group, headed by Ralph, falls the task of building the community. The other group, composed of Jack and his choirboys, takes on the duties of tending the signal fire and providing meat. The implications of these tasks seem clear enough. The moral leaders of society must build and guide; their leadership requires that they shelter their followers and inspire them. Ralph's moral leadership is essentially religious: the purpose of his life is to get home, and *home* acquires in the course of the fable the connotation of Heaven, while the signal fire, their means of salva-

tion, increasingly suggests an altar tended by priests. Here, of course, complications enter.

We might naturally assume that Ralph's group would tend to the fire as well as the hut building, since piety and domesticity go hand in hand. But Golding gives the fire tending job to those who must also do the hunting, in order to make his fable point a moral. Society, he argues, tries to serve both God and Mammon; they cannot both be served. The altar fire therefore goes out, significantly, when the hunters kill their first pig. That is, the strength of present appetites and impulses overcomes the necessarily vague and otherworldly serving of God in hope of salvation. Since killing and meat can pervert even the choirboys, we are expected to conclude that anyone may be lured away from piety. Even Ralph and Piggy crave meat, and in a later hunt Ralph also tastes the stronger meat of the desire to kill.¹ (Simon, though a choirboy, does not turn hunter but inexplicably joins Ralph's group—which rather weakens the force of Golding's moral, since Simon is the only "typical" choirboy.)

Having made his point about warrior-priests, Golding rearranges his characters into two opposed societies. Ralph, the fair-haired boy, heads a pastoral, peaceful, vegetarian, and religious group intent upon tending the fire and going home. Jack, ugly, red-haired, and knife-wielding, leads a much larger group made up of materialists who live for the moment, for meat, and for the hunt. Ralph rules his group by emphasizing their hopes for salvation; Jack preys upon his followers' fear of the Beast and promises protection and food. As time passes—and human history, the fable implies—the clouds of glory trailed from home fade into the light of common day. The half-remembered morality of home soon can induce a momentary hesitation and no more; the attractiveness of home fades into dreams that soon become nightmares.

For the religious group, the dominant image is the conch shell. Its authority rests on the shaky foundation of the boys' *contrat social*: since that has no force behind it, the conch becomes increasingly less effective and fittingly perishes with Piggy. Moral suasion, lacking punitive force, is impotent, Golding tells us. The other group is differently imperfect. It is held together by "irresponsible authority" (p. 197), by force without moral guidance. The group's dominant image is, appropriately enough, Jack's knife and its offspring, the sharpened sticks used for hunting and torture.² By the end of the story, Golding has made it clear that the ab-

¹ William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (New York, 1959), pp. 140 ff.

² There seems to be only one knife, Jack's, on the island, but the matter is not clear. Notice this curious passage: "'I cut the pig's throat,' said Jack. . . . 'Can I borrow yours, Ralph, to make a nick in the hilt?'" (p. 87). "Yours" has no ante-

solute power suggested by the knife tends to corrupt. Even Jack seems a little unhappy about the excesses to which his reliance on force and fear has led him, and the sadistic Roger is clearly preparing himself to challenge Jack's authority and institute an even nastier regime (pp. 224, 233 ff.). Hunting brutalizes the hunters, Golding tells us, and the Gresham's Law of human existence makes the survivors Hobbesian wolves to men. Historically, Golding implies, this happened long ago (see *The Inheritors*); we live now at the fag end of the process. There is no possibility of escape.

Golding's descriptions of society are psychological rather than sociological; in other words, the boys create certain social conditions by being certain types of boy. Ralph's health and good looks are apparently the decisive facts for him; typecast as a prefect, he merely plays his part. Piggy's asthma, poor eyesight, obesity, and lack of vitality have forced him to rely upon his mind; Jack's unattractive appearance has generated in him a resentment against winners like Ralph, a resentment that his physical strength and skill allow him to express in the form of intense competitiveness. ("Ralph sighed, sensing the rising antagonism, understanding that this was how Jack felt as soon as he ceased to lead" [p. 146].) Roger's sadism and Simon's mysticism (with a touch of epilepsy, like Dostoevski's Idiot) also appear to be inherent or inadvertently acquired attributes, rather than earned attainments. Although several of the children unmask their true selves on the island, none of the leaders can be said to change his basic character. That, it would seem, is determined not by society but by the innate cast of their minds. Since defects of character are not, in Golding's view, caused by society, we may conclude that social pressure has served to control the bad boys, but that they cannot be cured, no matter what social conditions are imposed upon them. (Ralph's society only antagonizes Jack.) On the other hand, since Ralph's mildness proclaims no devil he will always be basically good, like Simon and Piggy. On the island, if not in the real world left behind, these qualities and defects of character in the leading boys become the qualities and defects of their separate societies.

Golding describes several kinds of goodness. It is spiritual for Simon,

cedent, but surely refers to a knife. Later, after the spectacular killing of the sow, this dialogue takes place (p. 169):

[Jack] knelt down and was busy with his knife. . . . He spoke over his shoulder to Roger.

"Sharpen a stick at both ends."

Presently [Jack] stood up, holding the dripping sow's head in his hands.

"Where's that stick?"

"Here."

What did Roger sharpen the stick with?

common sense for Piggy; for Ralph it seems to be primarily obedience to the dictates of duty. Even after his dreams of home and a better world have faded, duty drives him to insist almost mindlessly on the need for smoke and shelter. These kinds of goodness, especially Ralph's, determine the social characteristics of his culture, Golding believes (pp. 250 ff.). Significantly, that society is a drab one, dominated by the dull and uncongenial toil of shelter building, coconut cup filling, and (later) fire tending. The only form of entertainment offered is the political sociability of the assemblies. If we generalize, as of course we must, from the specific situation of the fable to the real world, we must conclude that the moral and religious life is to Golding a remarkably unattractive one. We see no sign of ritual religion (except in Jack's demonic pig dance), no glorifying of God or his works, no hopefulness. The only message from Heaven is the dead parachutist; and the "strange, attendant creatures, with their fiery eyes and trailing vapours," that accompany Simon's body out to sea are not angels but ocean creatures (p. 190).

Heaven's existence itself is dubious, especially insofar as England stands for Heaven. At one point Simon significantly assures Ralph, "you'll get back all right" to "where you came from" (p. 137). Does he mean Heaven or England? Golding's references to the world outside the island are contradictory, but it seems clear that the English are at war with "the reds" (p. 200) and that the war is world-wide. The calm, self-assured *miles ex machina* at the end of the story certainly implies that England is winning. On the other hand, the airport from which the boys took off has been destroyed by an atom bomb (p. 20), and Golding explicitly tells us that the boys' "civilization was in ruins" (p. 78). The earthly equivalent of Heaven is evidently in a bad way, and we must think of the rescuing naval officer as no more than a grown-up Jack. Ralph's secular and religious salvation is surely dubious—although literary convention assures us that portentous utterances by such as Simon are always true. (See Salinger's story "Teddy" for a more eloquent example of the species.)

In contrast to Ralph's dully dutiful society and its dubious promises, Jack's world offers the immediate pleasures of feasting and hunting. Curiously, however, most of the boys seem to find little joy in the feasting—although they "dribble" at the mouth as predictably as Pavlov's dogs—and even less joy in the hunting. Only Jack and Roger take much pleasure in the chase; the other boys are generally scared. Many boys do no hunting; they join Jack's group only for food and for protection against the Beast. The reader may well sympathize with their choice. Since the hope of home, happiness, and Heaven is apparently a deluded

one, man might as well make the best of a bad bargain. Jack's objection to Ralph—"He just gives orders and expects people to obey for nothing" (p. 157)—seems unanswerable.

What lesson are we to learn from Golding's two opposed societies, Ralph's and Jack's? Golding is quoted as saying that "the theme is an attempt to trace the defects of society back to the defects of human nature. The moral is that the shape of a society must depend on the ethical nature of the individual and not on any political system however apparently logical or respectable" (pp. 250 ff.). *Must* here apparently means *does*, not *ought to*, since the novel does not seem to offer any prescription for social, political, or moral reform. Society's basis is "the ethical nature of the individual," then; but society is composed of many individuals, whose average ethical nature, Golding demonstrates in *Lord of the Flies*, is evilly inclined, morally sick. It is true that Simon's vision of the Beast is "the picture of a human at once heroic and sick" (p. 128). In the novel, however, humans are generally one or the other. Ralph might possibly be both heroic and sick, but his illness—his pleasure in hunting (pp. 140 ff.) and his participation in the killing of Simon—is relatively mild.

Humans as Golding characterizes them have a strong eighteenth-century flavor. Each person takes his character from a ruling passion that expresses itself in physical as well as psychological traits. Ralph must be handsome, Jack ugly. Like Henry Fielding, Golding separates mankind into sheep and goats in deterministic fashion. The majority of men are goats, whose defective ethical natures inevitably misshape society.

In *Lord of the Flies* two characters stand outside this irremediably defective society and comment on it. Piggy's comments, as well as the comment made by his death, seem clear enough to most readers; Simon's role is less well understood. Of the two boys, Simon is the more perceptive. Golding has stated that Simon represents the Apostle Peter—a representation that surely escapes the average reader, but that indicates Simon's importance to Golding as a purveyor of religious truth. Simon's interview with the Lord of the Flies, especially, allows Golding—at the expense of substantial improbability—to ram his lesson home: it's no go because evil is internal and ineradicable.

Golding has apparently given a great deal of thought to the specific nature of this evil, but his presentation of it has not been widely understood. There is considerable emphasis in the novel on killing, eating, and defecating. Simon, for example, trying to express man's sickness, asks the boys what the dirtiest thing is; the answer they give is excrement. This emphasis leads many readers to the obvious conclusion that Gold-

ing, like Hamlet, thinks of man as a combination of angel and animal and sees in his animal nature the source of his corruption. Such an interpretation is logical under the circumstances and seems to be given force by the novel's dominant images of evil—the Beast, the Lord of the Flies, and the pig's head. Here the obvious sensual and unpleasant connotations of *beast*, *pig*, *hog*, and *flies* seem to reinforce the philosophical idea of nasty animality.

A substantial barrier to this interpretation is raised by the character Piggy, however. His name obviously forces us to connect him with the pigs, a connection reinforced especially at the time of his death. The pigs having been called "bloated bags of fat" (p. 166), Golding describes Piggy as "a bag of fat" (p. 221) and says that when he died "Piggy's arms and legs twitched a bit, like a pig's after it has been killed" (p. 223). This enforced correspondence between the story's intellectual and its animals may seem pointless. Piggy is obviously not animalistic; his hair doesn't even grow (p. 81). But Golding forces us to revise our conventional attitude toward pigs—whose hair, of course, doesn't grow beyond a certain length either. Like Piggy, Golding's pigs are harmless and lazy. Both provide necessities of life; the pigs provide meat as Piggy provides fire, unwillingly. Both pigs and Piggy fall victim to the hunters' bloodlust. (Pigs are also quite intelligent animals.)

We must conclude that the pigs, like Piggy and Simon, are characterized chiefly as innocent victims, inhabitants of an Eden in which the boys are snakes (the Beast is first thought of as a snake). Evil in this world, says Golding, is not sensual or animal. The Lord of the Flies is not a pig, not an animal; as Simon points out, it is a "pig's head on a stick" (p. 177), the emblem of man's sadistic cruelty to natural things and of his ignorant attempts to placate a falsely externalized evil. The flies preying on the head and on Simon are the boys, worshipers of a revolting demon and devourers of innocence.³

That Simon understands the symbol in this way is demonstrated when he finds the dead parachutist and untangles his shrouds. Golding emphasizes "the poor body," "the poor broken thing"; and Simon real-

³ The flies surely suggest this on page 171, when they cover Simon, but eight pages later Golding has changed his mind and tells us that "even when the vessel broke in Simon's nose and the blood gushed out they left him alone, preferring the pig's high flavour." The contradiction is one of several signs of haste in the writing. We have already noted the ghost knives. A similar confusion is generated by the characters. On page 75 Henry is a littlun; on page 169 he's a bigun. On page 169 Bill is one of five hunters selected by Jack to steal Piggy's glasses. On page 175 Robert has replaced Bill; on page 176 Bill is a member of *Ralph's* group and explicitly not a hunter. The disparity between the ruin of civilization on page 78 and the calm officer of the ending is probably another example of muddle rather than a symbolic matter. The O. Henry ending was irresistible, or at least unresisted.

izes that "the beast was harmless and horrible" (p. 181). The beast in man, what unites him with the other animals, is not evil. (Simon never objects to meat eating.) Evil is specifically human, says Golding, and it inhabits the mind, not the body. He gives no sign of thinking that this tendency toward evil is fostered by life in society, despite his views on society, nor does he suggest that it is accepted deliberately by man's free will. On the contrary, the Lord of the Flies deterministically assures Simon that "I'm part of you" (p. 177). Not part of Simon himself, surely, nor of Piggy, but part of most people. Fielding reached much the same deterministic conclusion two hundred years earlier when he said that "there is in some minds a sensation directly opposite to that of benevolence, and which delights and feeds itself with acts of cruelty and inhumanity" ("A Clear State of the Case of Elizabeth Canning"). Against this innate delight in savagery, shown especially by Jack and Roger but shared in the dances by everyone except Piggy and Simon, all of man's ideals, principles, and distant goals are useless. At one point Ralph, dismayed at the growing anarchy on the island, insists that "the rules are the only thing we've got!" (p. 114). But the exclamation is made to seem as futile as Piggy's later insistence that "what's right's right" (p. 211). Jack has all the weight of force behind him when he answers, "Bollocks to the rules! . . . We're strong—we hunt!" (p. 114).

In a world where evil is so pervasive, the only way to be good is to be born good; but Golding suggests that early social training is of some value in restraining the vile impulses of those born bad. The inhibitions imposed upon innate savagery by civilization stop Jack from killing the piglet (p. 40) and make even Roger aim his stones to miss the littlun (p. 78). These inhibitions fade quickly, to be sure, but they are more effective than any means of coercion shown by Golding except physical fear. (Though society also used fear, probably, to develop the inhibitions.)

Fear controls most of man's actions in *Lord of the Flies*. As a deterrent from action, it is seen especially at the end of the story, when Jack's police state controls its citizens with threats of hunger, torture, and the Beast. Fear as an activating force is the basis for violence and cruelty. We see it in action especially during the storm, when the boys begin their dance out of terror and then turn savage because of the fear: "out of the terror," Golding says, "rose another desire, thick, urgent, and uncontrollable" (p. 188). All men would be cowards if they durst, Golding implies, but because fear is shameful, men transmute it into a compound of murderousness and sexual lust—the latter shown most explicitly in the killing of the sow (p. 168). Perhaps with maturity the boys will find lust as basic an impulse as fear, and will become that much more dangerous.

Fear as a motivating force is everywhere, but we look in vain for love. Even saintly Simon displays no more than disinterested charity. Piggy's attachment to Ralph is compounded of hero-worship and fear of Jack, while Ralph's lament at the story's end for the "true, wise friend called Piggy" is sentimental rather than factual; we are shown no sign of friendship between them. No one much likes anyone, in short. No friendships spring up on the island (although Golding apparently believes in the Ralph-Piggy friendship); no one laments his absence from parents or sisters or brothers; no one's memories of home include memories of friends.

We may conclude that Golding's view of our present civilization, conveyed primarily through his description of Jack's society, is a gloomy one. Men have banded together out of fear of the Beast, but necessarily have brought the Beast along with them. The resultant civilization offers a specious but reassuring protection against the Beast by inaccurately identifying it and setting up defenses like the pig's head on a stick. Such a civilization is aptly described by Golding as a "demented but partly secure society" (p. 187). Since the Beast is really within us, civilization cannot be purged of its discontents.

Furthermore, the battle between good and evil is an unequal one. On the island, existence is to good malignant, to bad men benign, and no day of reparation for the just is at hand. In a curious scene Henry (the littlun) bullies minute ocean creatures, Roger throws stones at Henry, and a palm tree drops coconuts on Roger (pp. 77 ff.). This chain of hostilities is probably a joke; we are not to conclude that nature is antagonistic to evil. Nature—human nature, especially—seems to favor the wicked. Jack and Roger are more than equal to their evil tasks, but Ralph is not good at goodness. He learns painfully to think in public as if playing chess, Golding tells us, but "the trouble was that he would never be a very good chess player" (p. 145). The good boys are all inadequate. Simon cannot communicate his ideas, and his insights into mankind's essential illness bring him only martyrdom. Piggy is perceptive but poorly educated and not much better at persuasive communication than Simon. He suffers also from another disadvantage; he is socially different. He is apparently the only lower-class boy on the island; he is physically unpleasant, incompetent, lazy, and cowardly; and his grammar is worse than the littluns'. In short, Golding sees to it that we are presented with a more than Manichean heresy and a world partial to the devil's party. In this world's idyllic youth, people may have lived simply and thought primarily of salvation, guided by philosopher kings, but now we are driven by fear and ruled by savage tyrants, our only desire the appeasing of our passions. The few good men, like Au-

den's Just, are no more than ironic points of light in an overwhelming darkness. Such, at least, is the message of *Lord of the Flies*.

The ordinary work of fiction can be defensibly judged only by its own laws; if a novel's world is consistent with itself, its divergence from a reader's own understanding of reality is irrelevant. But fables are different. They claim to describe our objective world, not their own. Such works can and must be judged by the accuracy with which they reflect our world and the perceptivity with which they interpret it. So judged, *Lord of the Flies* is open to several objections.

Perhaps the basic objection is that its subject is irrelevant. It claims to demonstrate that man cannot begin anew and create Utopia. But the human race cannot start from scratch; whatever we do, think, say, and assume is deeply conditioned by our past, rooted even in the structure of our languages. Nor could we isolate one generation. So when Golding tells us what happens when a generation is isolated, we may be academically interested, but we cannot—or should not—see in the children's situation any image of our own. They come to a bad end, and we may come to a bad end; but there is more coincidence here than prediction. Mankind has always been partial to the opinion that things aren't what they used to be, and in a time of crisis the opinion seems especially valid. But we cannot agree with every expression of this opinion simply because it flatters our own predilection.

In its description of human existence, the fable's lesser assumptions also seem open to criticism. Golding tells us that benevolent, paternal societies are overcome by warlike hunting tribes. Our historians find more warrior kings in the past, more paternal rulers in the present. Golding tells us that individual goodness cannot survive the attack of evil; we can only point out that it has done so for thousands of years. Golding tells us that man savagely craves meat and becomes evil in killing for it; we eat meat mildly, ourselves, and find that butchers are not ordinarily dangers to society. Golding tells us that the Lord of the Flies is inside us; agreeing, we add that the means of restraining him are also there. Golding says that the most angelic men (the choirboys) are most prone to become hunters and soldiers. What we know about hunters and soldiers does not confirm this assertion.

In addition, we may argue that Golding tries to eat his cake and have it too. He shows us Jack's society as an image of ours, yet he criticizes and condemns it by our standards. He tells us that civilization reflects man's dominant qualities and that those qualities are evil; yet in the novel the influence of society is almost always a good one. Thanks to society the boys find bullying a cause for shame and killing so distasteful that they must drive themselves to it. They have acquired rudimentary

moral codes and have learned to control their impulses—within limits, of course, but after all they are only boys. And that fact is also awkward.

Golding's choice of children, rather than adults, for his utopian experiment suggests that he considers them better and more likely to succeed in establishing an ideal society. (Or perhaps he only thinks that *we* believe this.) Yet time and again he shows that he really thinks children worse than adults. The littluns are useless, but even the older boys cannot cope with abstractions like duty and salvation, nor can they organize a society whose morality is both acceptable (i.e., Ralph's, not Jack's) and supported by force. More practically, the boys never think to plant gardens or make tools and utensils; they never try to educate the littluns; and, confusing shopping trips with warfare, they hunt pigs with spears when nets, traps, and pigsties would be more sensible and less passionate. In short, the reader repeatedly sees the children going wrong where he himself would not. Necessarily, then, he must conclude that this utopian experiment failed because of childish weaknesses and ignorance, not because of man's essential illness.

When he has concluded this, the reader has reversed what seems to be part of Golding's moral: the fable has become willy-nilly a defense of society rather than an attack on it. So potent a force is society, the reader finds, that even hunters like the naval officer can be kind, sadists can be kept from bullying children, and a hunter's son (Ralph's father is a naval officer) can become a moral leader. When we perceive the value of society, we must decide that Golding's images of society are erroneous. Our society, though bad, is not as corrupt as Jack's; our society's morality is not as impotent as that of Ralph's society. Even a skeptic must admit that society restrains barbarity more often than it licenses it.

But perhaps a milder criticism would conclude more fittingly. English newspapers tell us that juvenile delinquency has almost disappeared in Liverpool, the Beatles' home city, because the hoodlums are all busy playing musical instruments and singing in imitation of their heroes. Is it credible, realistically or fabulously, that the choirboys on the island never sing? Not even the *Dies irae*?

University of Connecticut
Storrs